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On Nauru, a Sinking Feeling

By **MARCUS STEPHEN**

Yaren, Nauru

I FORGIVE you if you have never heard of my country.

At just 8 square miles, about a third of the size of Manhattan, and located in the southern Pacific Ocean, Nauru appears as merely a pinpoint on most maps — if it is not missing entirely in a vast expanse of blue.

But make no mistake; we are a sovereign nation, with our own language, customs and history dating back 3,000 years. Nauru is worth a quick Internet search, I assure you, for not only will you discover a fascinating country that is often overlooked, you will find an indispensable cautionary tale about life in a place with hard ecological limits.

Phosphate mining, first by foreign companies and later our own, cleared the lush tropical rainforest that once covered our island's interior, scarring the land and leaving only a thin strip of coastline for us to live on. The legacy of exploitation left us with few economic alternatives and one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, and led previous governments to make unwise investments that ultimately squandered our country's savings.

I am not looking for sympathy, but rather warning you what can happen when a country runs out of options. The world is headed down a similar path with the relentless burning of coal and oil, which is altering the planet's climate, melting ice caps, making oceans more acidic and edging us ever closer to a day when no one will be able to take clean water, fertile soil or abundant food for granted.

Climate change also threatens the very existence of many countries in the Pacific, where the [sea level](#) is projected to rise three feet or more by the end of the century. Already, Nauru's coast, the only habitable area, is steadily eroding, and communities in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands have been forced to flee their homes to escape record tides. The low-lying nations of Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands may vanish entirely within

our grandchildren's lifetimes.

Similar climate stories are playing out on nearly every continent, where a steady onslaught of droughts, floods and heat waves, which are expected to become even more frequent and intense with climate change, have displaced millions of people and led to widespread food shortages.

The changes have already heightened competition over scarce resources, and could foreshadow life in a world where conflicts are increasingly driven by environmental catastrophes.

Yet the international community has not begun to prepare for the strain they will put on humanitarian organizations or their implications for political stability around the world.

In 2009, an initiative by the Pacific Small Island Developing States, of which I am chairman, prompted the United Nations General Assembly to recognize the link between climate change and security. But two years later, no concrete action has been taken.

So I was pleased to learn that the United Nations Security Council will take up the issue tomorrow in an open debate, in which I will have the opportunity to address the body and reiterate my organization's proposals.

First, the Security Council should join the General Assembly in recognizing climate change as a threat to international peace and security. It is a threat as great as nuclear proliferation or global terrorism. Second, a special representative on climate and security should be appointed. Third, we must assess whether the United Nations system is itself capable of responding to a crisis of this magnitude.

The stakes are too high to implement these measures only after a disaster is already upon us. Negotiations to reduce emissions should remain the primary forum for reaching an international agreement. We are not asking for blue helmets to intervene; we are simply asking the international community to plan for the biggest environmental and humanitarian challenge of our time.

Nauru has begun an intensive program to restore the damage done by mining, and my administration has put environmental sustainability at the center of our policymaking. Making our island whole again will be a long and difficult process, but it is our home and we cannot leave it for another one.

I forgive you if you have never heard of Nauru — but you will not forgive yourselves if you ignore our story.

Marcus Stephen is the president of Nauru.